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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that explored the impact of school district context on school effectiveness are presented in this paper, with attention to the processes through which district impact occurs. The case study examined a large school district in the Pacific Northwest with an expressed commitment to student performance. Methodology involved 100 hours of interviews with key district administrators, teachers, and support staff; a survey of 99 staff members at 6 schools; and document analysis. Specifically, the study compared evidence of school performance with the stated goals of key participants. Preliminary findings suggest that district context influenced the cultural correlates of school effectiveness. District context was experienced through "nesting cultures" and principals' mediating styles. Principals who acted as weak buffers between teachers and the school district context devoted a substantial amount of energy to affective staff issues, which may in turn hamper school effectiveness. In schools headed by principals with more effective mediating styles, building norms emphasized programmatic concerns. Most participants understood the stated district priorities of student learning and community relations. Longitudinal data on district student performance was incomplete, which appears to contradict the district's expressed focus on learning. Five tables are included. (LMI)

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An Exploration of the Impact of District Context Upon School Culture: Implications for Effectiveness

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Running Head: SCHOOL CULTURE IMPLICATIONS

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This is the first paper generated from a large scale qualitative study of a medium sized (adm 4,500) school district in the Pacific Northwest. Because we are still at the early stage of this research and due to the global nature of the questions being addressed this paper will be exploratory in nature and will largely serve to provide direction for further inquiry.

The overarching question being addressed by this study is what is the impact of school district context on the attainment of school effectiveness. Additionally, this study seeks to illuminate the processes through which district impact occurs. The subject school district was chosen due to its expressed commitment to making student performance its key mission. The supposed primacy of that focus can be seen in the district theme for the 1991-92 school year which was "learning is our target." The district also appeared to be a viable candidate for this study because of the reputation it held as a leader in education statewide and regionally. Tree River School District teachers and administrators have been regular presenters at professional conferences and district programs are frequently featured as models at regional professional meetings. Finally, this district was chosen because of its interest in the study and its willingness to provide unlimited access for the researcher team.

Data Set

Data for this paper was derived from two principle sources, the field notes of a team of five field researchers from Washington State University, a written "culture" survey administered to 99 staff members at six schools in the Tree River District, and thousands of pages of archival material from the district. Field notes included complete transcripts from over 100 hours of interviews with key administrative, teaching, and support staff members from the district. Tree River (a pseudonym) is a mostly white, working class district located approximately one hour away from one of the major metropolitan areas of the Pacific Northwest.

Data was analyzed and coded in accordance with procedures for qualitative analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984). The goal for this foundational paper was to examine and contrast evidence of school performance with the stated goals and intentions of key participants, as well as with the attributions made by members of the professional staff. Data was collected from staff members pertaining to perceptions of both district and site performance. By contrasting these multiple data sets we hoped to parcel out the impact of district influence over differential effectiveness in schools. Unfortunately, available longitudinal performance data was inadequate to determine differential effectiveness between schools, however, data was available on the perceived presence of certain effective schooling correlates (particularly correlates relating to the organizational culture of effective schools). Therefore, this paper will contrast the differences found between similar schools with different cultural profiles.

The "culture survey" administered to the Tree River staff consisted of two parts. Part one sought open ended responses to staff perceptions on district goals and intentions and the perceived best and worst aspects of district and school performance. The second portion of the survey requested an assessment of the strength of 14 cultural norms shown to have had an impact on the effective performance of schools (adapted from Saphier and King 1985) The fourteen norms assessed by the "Tree River Culture Survey" included:

Collegiality

Experimentation

High Expectations

Trust and Confidence

Tangible Support

Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base

Appreciation and Recognition

Caring-Celebration-Humor

Appreciation of Leadership

Clarity of Goals

Protecting What's important

Involvement of Stakeholders in Decision Making

Traditions

Honest, Open Communications

Findings

As mentioned above, the district had publicly declared through a high profile internal and external public relations campaign that its goal for the 1991-92 school year was to make its target "learning." Components of that campaign included a logo depicting an archery target with arrows trained on the bull's eye (the arrows were labelled: Instructional Strategies, Restructuring, Early Childhood Programs, Integration, Basic Skills, Special Programs, Student Assistance Programs, Technology, Vocational Education, and Assessment). The "Learning is our Target" logo was prominently displayed on posters, letter head, calendars and many other district publications. It was a theme that was preached to the building administrators at their August retreat and repeated regularly throughout the year. Given the prominence of this theme it was interesting to note the responses obtained on the first question of the district survey. That question asked staff to identify, "What you believe to be the district's priorities?" Table #1 indicates the frequency of coded responses to that query.

Insert Table 1 about here

While certain aspects of the instructional program that had a direct and clear bearing on academic performance were cited, e.g. multiple programs, focus on at-risk youth, and innovativeness, those comments generally related to the district's priority on program "providing" rather than on performance attainment (learning). It is

interesting to note that not a single response was coded as referring to the achievement of measurable performance as a district priority. In addition, the responses to this question seemed to indicate that a greater emphasis was being placed on special or add-on programs than on the "basic education" program. This may not have been inconsistent with the "target on learning" theme, since upon closer examination one notices that only 50% of the arrows were named for "basic educational" thrusts.

While the district's academic focus may not have been completely clear, the district's apparent commitment to public relations suffered no similar lack of understanding. Over one in four of the surveyed staff members cited aspects of community relations as perceived top priorities of their district.

In some cases the identification of this priority was accompanied by anger or cynicism. For example we heard that,

> *"They want to please the community, taxpayers, patrons etc"* (HC7)
>
> *They want to, "Look good on paper, Have good scores."* (W20)
>
> *They believe in, "Serving the community... and looking good to the community."* (MA6)
>
> *The priority is "what seems to make the district 'look good' as opposed to what's needed."* (W4)
>
> *The priority is "Public justification for administrative salaries."* (CR14)
>
> *The "Priorities in this district are to get as many 'showcase programs' started so that it appears that Tree River is innovative and 'ahead of the pack' on education....Results are not always good and the showcase courses quite often fade away after the newness wears off. Then the district starts the cycle all over again."* (M27)

However, other staff members understood that good community relations could provide an educational payoff as evidenced by the following comments,

The goal is "Being a front runner in educational trends, a model for other districts." (MA7)

They want "To be on the cutting edge of research and be able to publicly pronounce this." (HC3)

They believe in "Public relations. It is very important that the public sees the district has a very professional, caring district that can do everything." (W23)

The same ambivalence was heard in staff comments regarding their perception of the district's emphasis on innovation and bringing on line a multitude of programs. The virtuous aspects of the push for innovation was extolled by people who made comments like,

The goal is to "Provide a program to extend each student as far as they wish to go." (W1)

They want "To meet the needs of as many students as they can through special programs, grants, etc." (HC1)

However the push for innovation was also seen by some as having a problematic side as seen in comments like,

"We have the start up of many new programs, probably too many since there's a feeling of 'too much with too little time' amongst many of the teachers." (MA5)

The district believes in "having Tree River be the district with the most new programs." (MA9)

While staff perceptions on the appropriateness of district priorities may reflect a division of the house, the clear weight of opinion supports the view that successfully relating to external constituencies is a matter of top priority in the district.

District Effectiveness

The initial selection of the Tree River District for full a year's scrutiny was made due to the reputation the district held for being focused on issues of school effectiveness. The district was seen as a leader in the region in the implementation of the type of innovative programs that were thought to enhance student performance. For that reason it came as a surprise to us that the achievement scores of Tree Rivers students were no higher then they were. In most respects, they were comparable to the scores posted by the other schools in their county with similar population demographics and were not significantly better than one might have predicted based upon student SES. Table #2 shows the achievement test scores of the Tree River Schools as posted on the statewide achievement test administered in the fall of 1990 compared to other districts of their size.

Insert Table 2 about here

However, with the new "target on learning" we expected to see these scores boosted relative to their neighbors as well as relative to past district performance. The most recent test results, November 1991, reflect improvement relative to other districts, but not net growth per se.

While the district purports to value many measures of student performance beyond the standardized achievement tests (note that one of the arrows is labelled "assessment") aggregate data on other measures of achievement as hard to access. The district director of evaluation was unable to provide this researcher with any longitudinal measures of student performance beyond standardized test data.

However, with regards to the #1 inferred priority, community relations, there was no similar lack of data. Like with most districts in the state, Tree River goes to its patrons biannually for approval of tax levies. These routinely pass. Principals in the

Tree River District are expected to make phone contact with all of the parents in their schools regularly to inquire about their satisfaction with school programs and school performance. The superintendent personally monitors these and all other public relations data collection processes. In addition, she works closely with the editors of the local paper. Monitoring of community perception is further enhanced by the involvement of key administrators in civic affairs: the Assistant Superintendent is the current Rotary President and the Director of Student Services works actively with the local Lions Club. In short, the district has its administrative tentacles out and is constantly monitoring its community relations program. This monitoring involves multiple measures and is used to adjust administrative work in accordance with the dictates of data received. A near perfect levy record, the superintendent's longevity (she has held her office for 12 years) and the rarity of incumbent board defeats provides testimony to the success of monitoring public confidence in the school.

Another public face of the district, the Tree River athletic program, is also closely monitored. Not only are scores kept at each contest and reported in the local paper, but other visible signs of support are clear to even the casual observer. The football stadium at Meridian High School is the single most prominent structure in the community, the football coach is the most senior member of the high school faculty and the trophy case is the most prominent interior fixture at the high school.

Nested Cultures

Increasingly the role of organizational culture has been documented as a key factor in organizational effectiveness and performance (Deal and Kennedy 1982 and Little 1982). In the corporate sector the focus of cultural analysis is generally the parent corporate entity. With schools, due to their loosely coupled structure, the focus of cultural inquiry has usually been the individual school site. In the case of a corporation like Chrysler, it is assumed that Lee Iaccoca's influence as a cultural hero can move all the way from the corporate headquarters in Detroit to an assembly line in

Ohio, yet it is assumed that in a typical school district the superintendent's influence may not be meaningfully felt outside of his or her earshot.

The theoretical orientation of this paper is that public school staffs work in nested and overlapping cultures and therefore to understand the specific cultural factors which impact a particular group of professionals at any particular point in time, one must acknowledge the intersection and relationships of all those cultures.

Vertical cultures.

On the veritical plane we see nested cultures. (Citation) points out that these are like sets of Soviet nesting dolls each one fitting nicely inside the other. The larger patron society, with its values, beliefs, and meanings about education sits on top of and influences the culture of all school districts within its borders. The district as a corporate entity binds together the beliefs, values, and procedures of the board of education and all the employees who work in the same system under the same managerial authority. At the next level is the school site where a collection of norms, behaviors, and shared meanings often exerts significant influence over school performance (Rosenholtz 1989 and Little 1982). Finally, there are work team cultures. We are now finding that grade level teams, groups of specialists and departments (at the secondary level) have developed belief systems and modes of operation that are tight, controlling and provide motivational support for members (McLaughlin 1990).

One can view an individual teacher as residing simultaneously in each of these nested cultures. She is a member of her community, is a member of her district's staff, spends most of her waking hours at a particular school, and works closely with a select group of colleagues. Due to loose coupling, technical supervision, time, and proximity the culture which people tend to identify with most closely and which holds the greatest sway over their daily work is the one resting lowest one in the nest (just as our affinity to our family values will likely be stronger than the affinity we feel towards our ethnic group or our nation state.)

Horizontal cultures.

The vertical nests do not completely circumscribe the cultural influences that effect school personnel. School employees are often members of several parallel and overlapping cultures. For example they may be affiliated with organizations that share values (union and professional groups) and/or see themselves as specialists within the education profession (teacher, administrator, counselor). Each of those cultural groups has its own norms, meanings and beliefs which further influence professional behavior. Figure #1 illustrates the intersection of these vertical and horizontal cultures.

Insert Figure 1 about here

While a complete understanding of the cultural influences impacting school effectiveness involves analyzing all of these cultures and more, such an examination is clearly beyond the scope of this study. In this paper we will simply try to explore the significance and interactions of the relationship between two of the vertical cultures closest to the teacher (the district and the school) and their consequences for organizational effectiveness.

Norm Strength

The Tree River District Culture Survey asked teachers from six buildings to rate the strength of 14 cultural norms on a four point Likert type scale as they applied to both their district and their school. The rating scale was as follows:

1=**Characteristic** of our school/district,

2=**Generally characteristic** of our school/district,

3=**Seldom characteristic** of our school/district,

4=**Not characteristic** of our school/district.

For purposes of data analysis we interpreted scores of one or two as implying that the respondent saw the norm as normative for their school or district. Similarly, we interpreted a score of three or four to mean that the respondent perceived the prevalence of that norm to be weak enough to be, at best, a diminimous factor in organizational culture. By averaging the number of positive reports (scores of one or two) we were able to convert these individual ratings into a percentage score that reflected on the norm's perceived strength. Table #3 reports in rank order the strength of the 14 norms as ranked by the 99 teachers surveyed at the Tree River District.

Insert Table 3 about here

It is difficult for us to evaluate the relative strength of norms attributed to different vertical positions within a set of nested cultures. In our earlier work (Sagor and Curley 1991) we presumed that a score of 75% made a particular characteristic normative for an individual school. Our view was that if three out of four members of a faculty believed that their colleagues shared a behavior, that behavior could be considered valued by the group. However, that 75% cutoff seems rather high when applied to cultures nesting higher in the hierarchy. Perhaps a score of 60% is a more appropriate criteria for significance for district culture. However, setting that criteria is beyond the reach of this data. Nevertheless, we did find it interesting to look at the relative rank-ordering of norm strength by the same respondents when applied to their building culture as opposed to their district.

When we look at it this way we see that many of the factors that rank as the strongest components of district culture are "high expectations" (1st place), "reaching out to the knowledge bases" (2nd place), "collegiality" (3rd), "experimentation" (3rd), and "clarity of goals" (3rd) don't rank quite as high in the buildings. Interestingly, these are

all cultural factors which one would expect to create an initial push for and provide the pressure to maintain high academic performance.

A different picture emerges at the buildings. The ranking of the norms of "reaching out to the knowledge base" (10th place) and "experimentation" (12th place) are quite low compared with district ratings, yet other norms which ranked low as district values "trust and confidence" (9th-district, 1st building) and "honest, open communication" (13th-district, 6th-building) are comparatively high. How might these differences be interpreted?

One explanation is that in Tree River the district is the primary source of the push for academic innovation and improvement,while the buildings are the prime venues for the affective support of teachers. To determine if this is a plausible explanation, we will need to revisit this question with other data.

A Day in the Life of a TRSD Principal

As part of the data collection for this study one researcher shadowed seven Tree River principals for one a day each. The observation dates were selected at random and the principals were instructed to prepare nothing special for the days of the visitation. Based on the field notes from the observations at the six schools the researcher estimated administrative time allocation. Those estimates are reflected in table #4.

Insert Table 4 about here

This data implies that these TRSD principals spend proportionally more time attending to matters of student supervision, management of organizational logistics, and interpersonal problem resolution then they do with the implementation of instructional innovation, supervision of instructional practise, or other matters which directly relate to teaching and learning.

As a further check we examined the self study reports from each of the six subject buildings. These reports, developed by the local school staffs are expected to reflect a comprehensive assessment of school needs and priorities for improvement. Each "action plan" also contains detailed lists of specific actions to be taken and methods to to be used to evaluate and monitor progress. The overwhelming majority of goals in these self-studies dealt with non-academic matters and not a single objective in any one of the six reports implied or committed the staff to producing measurable growth in student academic performance.

The combined analysis of the behavior of the principals, the building targets for improvement and the perceptions of the teaching staff all imply that affective and managerial issues have been commanding more attention from the staff in these buildings than have academic or instructional issues.

The Translation of District Priorities

How does a school staff come to understand and interpret the priorities and goals of their district? In our time at Tree River we identified three major vehicles for this transmission: Formalized written internal communications, messages communicated through third parties, and face to face communications with district office representatives. For a variety of reasons third party communications appeared to provide the most credible source of data for the professional staff. Formalized written communications were suspect; as they were more likely to be seen as part of an orchestrated public relations effort. Research on public relations supports that this material would be generally viewed with suspicion (Tannenbaum 1956). Face to face communication with district administrators might be credible were it not for the relative infrequency of those contacts. While the superintendent takes pride in her thrice yearly visits to each school for informal chats with the faculty, we regularly heard the criticism that, "We never see them here." The shortcomings of the first two forms of communication forced a reliance on the remaining strategy, third party

communication, as the primary mechanism for learning about district priorities and policies.

The building principals and other Tree River administrators are the key go-betweens in these communications. How they present the district, its priorities, its demands, and the "hot" issues should have a major impact on how their staffs experienced the district culture. Our observations reflected that allTree River principals didn't use the same mechanisms to communicate district expectations and priorities to their staffs. In fact, preliminary analysis of our field notes reflects a least three categories of principal buffering.

Three Buffering Styles

From our data it appears that one of the major filtering mechanisms for translating district expectations and priorities was the buffering style of the building principal. It has been noted many places in the leadership literature that effective leaders buffer followers from distractions and other detrimental elements of the outside environment (Hanson 1991). Buffering enables workers to focus on the tasks at hand and the goals for the immediate work group without having their finite energy and organizational focus siphoned off to tangential matters. When dealing with the multiple cultures that exists in a medium sized public school district like Tree River, principal buffering then becomes a necessary bridge over the moat between the nested district and building cultures.

In Tree River we observed three fundamentally different buffering styles which functioned like doorways through which district culture was experienced by the members of individual school communities. Two of the principals we observed functioned like "solid core" wood doors, two as though they were made of "sculptured" glass (defracting the light as it shined through), and two operated like "screen" doors allowing most breezes to blow through unhindered.

The "solid core" principals.

Sarah, the High School principal at Meridian High School, was a committed, hardworking, and hard-nosed administrator. While her educational philosophy was very much in line with that of the superintendent and although she had prospered under the superintendent's personal and programmatic support, she seemed to be forever involved in a power struggle with her boss. One would be inclined to call it a "love-hate" relationship. Joan, the Tree River superintendent, consistently receives better leadership and more dedicated support from Sarah than from perhaps anyplace else in the district. Sarah could always be counted on to defend Joan against attackers whether from inside or outside of the organization. Nevertheless, Sarah was determined to be seen by all her subordinates as the chief executive officer in her building. To all who worked at Meridian High the buck would always be seen as stopping on Sarah's desk. Generally, Sarah was carrying forth her own agenda, but when she was carrying forth a district mandate it was likely to be seen as a goal which she had personally committed to. Sarah was simply not the type of leader to implore her staff to carry out a project simply, "Because Joan said we have to!"

However, Sarah's independence hardly made life easy for Joan or the other district administrators. Sarah was often a staunch, even obstinate defender of her building's priorities, and she was not inclined to respectfully defer to lessor central office personnel. Joan was willing to put up with much grumbling about Sarah (at the central office) because of her good work, the personal loyalty she expressed, and because her leadership style seemed effective.

An analysis of the data from the Meridian High School staff showed a comparatively positive view of district culture. The Meridian High School teachers rated their district culture higher on the norms of "tangible support," "involvement in decision making," and "honest, open communication" then did the teachers from any of the other buildings. This indicated to us that these teachers were receiving a more

positive view of the district's influence over their working conditions than were teachers who worked under other leaders.

Another venue where we saw the solid core door phenomena was with another, yet very different, principal. Janet was a young, vivacious principal serving a small elementary school, Marysville, that had been incorporated into the Tree River district a dozen years ago. Because of the size of Marysville and Janet's desire to spend more time with her one year old child she worked on a .6 FTE contract. While Sarah impresses everyone with her toughness and resolve, a first impression of Janet conveyed warmth, ease and softness. However, there is a lot of determination lying just under the surface. Janet calculates very clearly. Joan, the superintendent, describes her interactions with the Marysville principal this way,

> *"Janet is a joy. I guess this is really only her second year, yet it seems she's been with us forever. I think that says a lot about how I feel about her and the job she does. Janet is another one who is always gracious, but she can be very------- , things that she feels strongly about, she can be very persistent. And when it comes to something she does feel strongly about, what's right for kids or staff, she makes her case, she makes it strongly, and she doesn't back off until something's done about it. And I appreciate that about her. She's not a principal that ever calls "wolf." Her issues are legitimate, they're well thought through, and again, when she feels the need to say, "Hey, I need some help here. This is the situation. Now, I expect something in return." And she gets it.*

Janet doesn't petition the central office nearly as much as Sarah does, but when she "pushed," it was because she felt she needed to prevail and as Joan related she invariably did. Also, unlike Sarah, her interpersonal manner was appreciated and well received by the other central office administrators. So while these two administrators presented vastly different styles, they both erected almost impervious buffers between their staffs and the district office. By positioning their backs between

their buildings and the district, they freed their teachers to feel complete ownership of local initiatives. This left the teaching staffs feeling empowered and relatively unencumbered by external pressure. Sarah paid some costs for this stance (the frustration with her behavior by many in the central office) which Janet did not, yet the teachers in both buildings benefited equally.

Sculptured glass.

Glenn was the master of the sculptured glass door. As the principal of an elementary school that had experienced several administrators in recent years. All of Glenn's recent predecessors were assertive, had strong curriculum backgrounds, close relationships with the superintendent, and fireplug personalities. After ten years of this type of leadership, his laid back style was much appreciated by the faculty. While many faculty needed the emotional relief that was provided by his non-directive style, they also reported wanting protection from district pressure which they were certain would be forthcoming if he didn't provide an effective buffer.

Having occasionally incurred lectures from the superintendent (often delivered in administrative council meetings) that he was to work as a member of the (district) team, not as a free agent serving only his school and its community, he became aware that stonewalling wouldn't be an effective strategy. Instead he chose to "outmaneuver" the district office. He accomplished this primarily through careful reconnaissance. Glenn would stay alert to the key phrases and other clues about the directions incurring favor at the central office. He would then be sure to incorporate that language into his reports on the improvement efforts at his school. He would also be sure to volunteer to be part of any study team or pilot group that was investigating new initiatives. By using this strategy he saw to it that his school would be relieved of pressure (since they would be viewed as the leaders) and since they were ahead of actual policy they would be granted greater degrees of freedom in tailoring programs as they saw fit.

He relates a humorous story about the time that he learned that the district was interested in pursuing "outcome based education." Immediately he began labelling the "blended services" and "integration" initiatives that his faculty had been working on, as their "outcome based education" project. This brought training, resources and even some recognition to his faculty for their "innovativeness." A short while later when he was reporting on their work (at a district principal's meeting) it was pointed out that his project had almost nothing to do with "outcome based education." He apologized for his confusion and simply changed his vocabulary. Because of Glenn's suspicion of district's motives (he seems to believe they are more interested in public relations and the appearance of innovativeness than in substantial structural improvement and/or teacher empowerment) he feels comfortable manipulating the system to provide the freedom he feels his staff requires.

Our data reveals that Glenn's efforts are successful in gaining appreciation and support for his leadership both within his building, amongst his parents and patrons, and from the district office. However, it seems not to have produced a positive perception of the district by his teachers. In spite of his "sculptured glass door" practices and the relief it provides, there remains a solid base of fear, suspicion and frustration about the district amongst the Strawberry Hill staff.

This study included both of the Junior High Schools in Tree River, High Country and Washone. The Washone principal was another prime example of the sculptured glass phenomenon. The junior high schools serve demographically similar populations (based upon free and reduced lunch figures and levels of parental educational attainment) however, they appear to have significantly different cultures. Emmet, the current principal at Washone (and formerly the principal at High Country) is a long time staff member in Tree River. He is both respected and liked by nearly everyone in the district. In watching him with kids, colleagues, and teachers you begin to see him as the family's Uncle Emmet, not as an innovative educational leader per se.

He has, however, been able to translate these interpersonal strengths into an impressive record of program implementation. Two years ago, the superintendent let it be known that she wanted to see certain middle school concep'ts introduced into the two junior high schools. Emmet got out in front. Although personally conservative, methodical, and generally slow moving, he nevertheless lead this charge and took his teachers on trips to view model middle schools, argued successfully for financial support for their planning efforts, and even secured funding for extra daily planning time for his multi-disciplinary, 7th grade teams.

Now that Washone is completing its first year of implementation (of a program inspired by the superintendent and put in place on a time line that appeared to be well ahead of Emmet's personal comfort zone) the Washone faculty views itself as innovators and Emmet as a great and efficacious supporter of teacher lead innovation. The faculty even seems quite supportive of and appreciative of the district's financial commitment. Washone teachers rated the district quite high on the norms of "collegiality," "reaching out to the knowledge bases," and "tangible support."

Again we see two different styles within the "sculptured door" approach. Glenn is laid back and Emmet is fatherly, harried and nervous, yet both have managed to keep their schools out ahead of district pressure and, therefore, free to <u>feel</u> in charge of their own destinies.

<u>The screen doors.</u>

Another picture emerges at the other Junior High School, High Country, and at Chauffeur's Ridge elementary school. At these schools two relatively inexperienced principals, both new to the district, (they are in their second years) are struggling to establish themselves in Tree River. They are both happy to be in the district and know that their long term success will be determined by satisfying the superintendent. (Not only does Joan personally supervise all Tree River principals but she takes a particular interest in directing the work of the rookies.) Buddy, at High Country and Robin at

Chauffeur's Ridge have both adapted to these circumstances by providing a "screen door" as the only buffer between their faculty and the district.

Chauffeur's Ridge is a well managed school serving a middle class community. One can find most district programs operating in the school and carried out faithfully. For example, the thematic unit that has become a part of each elementary school's foray into multi-disciplinary teaching, involved most of the Chauffeur's Ridge teachers, became a focus for a two week instructional unit, and culminated in a well attended parent night. However, when asked the faculty said they had no intention of spreading this innovation beyond its mandated two week stint, since it required "too much effort." In a similar minimal compliance mode, the building's effort at "integration" (the district's word for blending handicapped students into the mainstream) was confined to the work of one fifth grade teacher (who held dual certification) who with an aide and a slightly lower class size served all the LD and MR students at his grade level. The 1991-92 goals for Chauffeur's Ridge reflect the schools focus on adult rather than kid issues. This "take it easy" attitude didn't mean that the Chauffeur's ridge staff was without emotion. Their comments about the district reflect some serious concerns, expressed with more than a little bit of anger.

> *"We are not considered professional enough to make decisions that directly affect students."* (CR-6)
>
> *"I feel that teachers, as the educators of students, are not always asked what they think will be best for students. Many district decisions are made by administrators without using teachers for the professionals they are. The district looks outside for professional opinions without considering what would be best for us."* (CR-12)
>
> *"We are supposed to be a building based management school by each school, but either the principals or superintendent makes the decisions that*

affect us most with little or no input by the building's staff. This is not building based management!" (CR-15)

While Robin stands aside, avoiding a pro-active stance on school improvement issues, she apparently has allowed district expectations to bowl over her staff unimpeded. The consequences of this "screen door" doesn't foster realization of the district's focus on learning or even immersion in the district norms of "reaching out to the knowledge bases" "experimentation," or "high expectations," rather it has fueled cynicism and resentment.

Buddy had the unenviable fortune of following the popular Emmet into High Country. Unfortunately, he had neither Emmet's personal power (borne of a long successful history in Tree River), self-confidence, or freedom of movement which could enable him to become a strong buffer between his faculty and the central administration. Many High Country teachers have had a habit of looking upon all leadership with significant suspicion. Their current resentment begins with feeling that their school had been overlooked during a recent remodeling initiative. They also resented Emmet being taken away to the fancier and newly remodelled school and they harbored (the irrational) suspicion that the superintendent favored the other junior high simply because its "Bobcat" mascot and school colors matched those of her alma mater. Finally many were inclined to fight the middle school concept simply because it had its origins at the district office. As hard as Buddy tried, he simply couldn't get his faculty on board. He won some points (borne out of sympathy) for occasionally standing up to the district while supporting his faculty, but fundamentally his teachers refused to be pushed and saw the push coming right through their "screen door" and past their principal. Not only did the screen door provide Buddy with no security, it almost insured staff resistance to the very change initiatives he was trying to foster. High Country is a divided staff as can be seen by these comments. Various staff members

hold different views, both about themselves and about their district. For example, one teacher said,

> *"I am disappointed by, "The negativity of some individuals (faculty) in regards to students and the district. I generally support the district and don't look for spooks behind every tree or bush. I feel its difficult to keep an optimistic outlook at times."* (HC-1) But another felt,
>
> *"This staff works very well as a group. We all get along very well."* (HC-4)
>
> *Similarly one told us,*
>
> *The district has, "Good ideas, wrong approach--(they) don't have a clue about building base decisions and they push ideas without backing of time and money."* (HC-3)
>
> *The best thing about the district is, "They keep the priority of learning in front of us as teachers."* (HC-2)

Summary and Discussion

The instructional context of the Tree River District is marked by a directive, program oriented, and public relations sensitive central administration. While the faculty perceives community relations as the #1 district priority, they also sense the district's commitment to cutting edge program development. This is revealed in the comparatively strong district norms of "experimentation," "reaching out to the knowledge base," and "high expectations."

All teachers in the Tree River district live their professional lives in nested cultures. Their view of district culture seems to be strongly influenced by the mediating styles employed by their principals, who have been observed as doors between the two cultures, some block out unpleasant district influences by erecting a "solid core" between school and central office. Others buffer their staffs from central office intrusion with "sculptured glass" (that deflects the light) and others offer no protection, at all, acting instead as "screen doors." The method of principal door keeping appears to

correspond with the cultural profile of the individual schools. In this study of six schools, each of which share the same district and several of which have demographically identical student bodies, faculty perception of building norms appears to be influenced by principal gate keeping style. Where the principals are more "solid core" or "sculptured glass" the programmatic norms (experimentation, reaching out to the knowledge bases, clarity of goals) appear stronger than in their "screen door"counterparts. In schools where the principal operates in the screen door mode the programmatic norms may be lower but certain affective norms are comparatively higher (caring, celebration and humor, appreciation and recognition, trust and confidence).

The data on student performance was so incomplete that few inferences can be drawn. However, it is interesting to note that in a district which has made learning its target, there is so little available longitudinal data on student performance. Lacking this data, this discussion will need to be restricted to tracing the correlations between buffering style and those norms that should be expected to accompany increased effectiveness. It will need to be left for further research to determine if in these six schools the strength of these norms will, one day, indeed correlate with differential degrees of effectiveness.

Emerging Hypothesis, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

From this preliminary data we suspect that district context does assert an influence, at least upon the cultural correlates of school effectiveness, in constituent schools. District context seems to be experienced through the nesting of cultures and the mediating experience of building leadership. However, regardless of the individual principal leadership style, certain elements of district context are clearly experienced by most members of the professional staff. The district's stated goal "Target on Learning" and its more powerful latent goal "Positive Community Relations" are widely understood. The meaning attached to these understandings will, however, differ as a

function of leadership behavior. Where principals apply a more opaque buffer between staff and district, the perceived goals of the district appear more positive. As the buffer gets more transparent,staff interpretations of district behavior tends to become more cynical. As a consequence of the negative views held by teachers (in these buildings) towards the district's academic and community relations goals, building administrators focus disproportionately on affective staff issues. This diversion of administrative energy away from instructional priorities serves to undermine the very cultural norms that support instructional improvement and may ultimately undermine school effectiveness. This theoretical conception is reflected in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

If this conception is accurate than a dilemma may be present for strong program oriented school superintendent like Joan; tone down your forceful role in instructional leadership or be certain to hire self-confident, effective, "solid core" principals. We suspect that with a strong central administration like at Tree Rivers, only exceptional principals will likely become effective buffers and provide strong local instructional leadership. Ironically, we suspect that somewhat less talented principals (not incompetent ones, but ones who are simply o.k.) may well provide better instructional leadership in districts were they will encounter weaker superintendents with less well defined educational philosophies.

More analysis of the available data from Tree River will be necessary to determine if this model does in fact apply in this district. The low response rates obtained on the culture survey at both Strawberry Hill and High Country make cross-site comparisons of our quantitative data suspect at best. Finally, without data that establishes a definitive performance difference between schools this entire discussion could be irrelevant to increasing "school effectiveness." For this researcher, it is

imperative to determine if this is the case this since my interest in organizational culture grew out of its apparent relationship to performance effectiveness.

Ultimately, if these theoretical models are supported by further data from Tree River then it will become important to investigate their application to other district contexts and to explore adaptive buffering styles of principals at greater length. We will need more robust descriptions of these adaptations and we will need to determine if these styles are subject to change or remediation. We will want to find out if principals attach themselves to particular styles because of the context of the situation or if their buffering style is a function of personality? If the latter is the case to what degree are administrators amenable to change and what are the conditions under which administrators might be motivated to adjust their behavior? Ultimately, if administrators are able to adjust their behavior what are the skills needed by their supervisors to help them make the most of their responsibility to buffer between nested cultures?

It will also be important to explore an additional question which grew out of this study. Why does a district administered by well educated, well meaning, and committed administrators, who profess a commitment to improve academic performance, consistently behave in ways that relegates the focus on academic learning to second place at best? In the final analysis answering that question may prove more helpful for educational policy makers than discovering any new set of effective schooling correlates.

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Table 1

Perceived District Priorities

	(N-99)
Community Relations	27
Multiple Programs	14
At Risk Students	12
Curriculum Projects	9
Support of Staff	3

Table 2

Comparison of Similar Size* Districts 4th Grade
Results (Median NP)
Total Battery (MAT-6) and Subject Average (CAT) x Year

	CAT-81	MAT-85	MAT-90
A	60	49	60
B	57	49	45
C	60	61	59
D	58	46	60
E	66	62	61
F	57	56	61
TREE RIVER	58	53	42
H	55	53	61
I	53	42	47
J	57	61	61
K	64	55	61
L	65	55	49
M	51	61	60
N	49	53	56
O	46	36	32
P	74	63	64
Q	64	67	67
R	64	53	59
S	59	61	53
T	62	63	63
AVG	59	55	56
STATE	62	55	56
NEIGHBORING DIST	63	53	53
TREEz RIVER	58	53	42

*COMPARISION DISTRICTS: ENROLLMENT = 3500-5500 (1989)

Table 3

Norm Strength Total Sample, N=99

	Site			District	
1	Trust & Confidence	92%	1	High Expectations	85%
2	High Expectations	91%	2	Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base	78%
3	Protection of What's Important	90%	3	Collegiality	72%
3	Collegiality	90%	3	Experiementation	72%
5	Appreciation & Recognition	86%	3	Clairity of Goals	72%
6	Honest, Open Communication	85%	6	Appreciation & Recognition	68%
7	Traditions	84%	7	Protection of What's Important	63%
7	Clarity of School Goals	84%	8	Traditions	60%
9	Involvement in Decision Making	81%	9	Trust and Confidence	54%
10	Tangible Support	80%	10	Tangible Support	53$
10	Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base	80%	11	Appreication of Leadership	46%
12	Experimentation	79%	12	Caring, Celebration & Humor	45%
13	Caring, Celebration & Humor	78%	13	Involvement in Decision Making	40%
14	Appreciation of Leadership	72%	13	Honest, Open Communication	40%

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14	Appreciation of Leadership	72%	13	Honest, Open Communication	40%

Table 4

Observed Adminstrative Time Allocations

Activity Area	Range Observed	Average %
Activities	0-10%	5%
Instructional Innovation	0-15%	6.67%
Other teaching/learning	0-25%	8.33%
Supervision of Instruction	0-25%	10%
Student Guidance/Conflicts	5-25%	13.33%
Communications/PR	5-25%	14.17%
Managing Logistics	15-30%	20.83%
Student Supervision	10-35%	21.67%

Table 5

District Priority	Buffering Style	Building Norms/ Leadership Emphasis
		Programmatic
	Solid Core	
Academic Push	Sculptured Glass	
	Screen Door	
		Affective